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By
P. MORDAUNT BARNARD, B.D.

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THE INTERPRETATION OF THE NEW
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I

THERE are many indications that at the present time we stand at a critical turning point in the history of religious thought. We have each to take our share, however minute it may be, in an inevitable movement of change which must in time have most momentous consequences. There are some who would describe the present age as marked especially by materialism, scepticism, and irreligion. It would be idle to deny the existence of much that is unchristian, but whether such tendencies exist to an abnormal extent is very doubtful. It is in every way a step forward if thoughtful doubt is encroaching on thoughtless acquiescence in traditional ideas. Laymen are now, more perhaps than ever before, thinking things out for themselves; but, as is characteristic of Englishmen, they keep to themselves their thoughts on matters that touch them most deeply, and the true character of the changes that are taking place is thus obscured.

This characteristic reticence about sacred things forms one of the great difficulties that stands in the way of any attempt to grasp the actual position of affairs, and unless this is accurately gauged it is impossible to avoid more or less disastrous mistakes of method, even on the part of those whose efforts are the result of the best and most honest intentions. Unless a teacher thoroughly understands not only the intellectual capacities, but also the mental and moral condition of those he is attempting to instruct, it is certain that he will produce an effect far different from that at which he is aiming. This danger is especially great in the case of teaching that rests upon a denominational foundation, and for the great mass of the general public all the instruction that is received in regard to the Bible is of this character, far the larger proportion of it being given from the pulpit. A preacher naturally, and indeed almost inevitably, assumes that his hearers admit in the main the same fundamental propositions as he does himself. If this is not the case, his words often have an effect exactly contrary to that which he intended to produce. It is usually impossible for him to judge of this : he will hear only of those who agree with what he has said ; those who disagree will say nothing, and think the more.

First let us take the case of misjudging intellectual capacity. It is a matter of common experience that clever men are apt to give teaching that is expressively said to be above the heads of those who are taught ; they have no sympathy with those who are not on the same intellectual level as them-

selves. Sometimes they fail to make themselves understood because they choose to deal with subjects which are actually too deep, or too intricate, for the ordinary partially-trained mind ; more often, however, the cause of their not being understood lies not so much in the nature of the subject dealt with, as in their habit of using technical terms to express shortly certain ideas which might equally well be developed in popular language, and thereby rendered easily intelligible. But the mistake of under-rating intellectual capacity is really a far commoner one ; those who have enjoyed the advantage of special training in any subject are always inclined to regard ignorance of technical terms and want of familiarity with the usual routine of textbook arguments as evidence of a low standard of intelligence. There are few errors that have a more disastrous effect than this one ; the true test of intellectual capacity is the power of forming a sound judgment, and this is perfectly independent of technical knowledge ; if a would-be teacher considers himself to be on a higher level than his hearers, he is inevitably led to state his own conclusions dogmatically, instead of calling forth in them the power of judgment, which should be the main object of all teaching.

Closely allied to this mistake of under-rating intellectual capacity is that of misjudging the mental position of others, if I may be allowed to use the phrase. It is extraordinary how often a little enquiry will show that people have thought deeply on a subject which one would be inclined to imagine

unlikely to have occurred to them. This is the cause of a great deal of religious teaching being mis-directed; it is assumed that questions of fundamental importance will not have presented themselves to the mind of the average person, and that therefore they are better left alone for fear of causing doubt. As a result people find that they are taught nothing about the very problems which are most urgently pressing for solution in their minds, and consequently they cannot avoid feeling that they are out of touch with much that they hear or read, and therefore take only a very passing interest in religious matters. It is undeniable that in the past there has been a conscious effort made to repress independent thought; indeed, a talk with old-fashioned people will be enough to show that this past is not very remote, and the traditions of it survive in the pulpit-teaching of to-day. Clergy who intend to be quite straightforward evade questions of difficulty, partly no doubt because they feel that they cannot themselves really face them, but partly also because they do not recognise that these questions actually are in people's minds and require answering. Persons of average ability undoubtedly think a great deal in the present day; when they find that their strivings after truth are met by their accredited teachers with an intimation that they had better let alone questions which they are not properly qualified to understand, and simply bow to authority, then they do not think the less, but keep their thoughts more entirely to themselves. In this way it happens that the teachers—I refer

more especially to the clergy of the Church of England—lose most valuable opportunities of getting to know the real needs of those whom it is their business to teach.

Thirdly, let us consider the case of misjudging the moral position of others. It is a fact that much current teaching is positively shocking to the moral sense of people who have learned to think for themselves; they find themselves asked to believe things against which their moral nature revolts. It is true that a great deal of this sort of teaching has now been placed as it were in the background, but we cannot help feeling that it is there in the background, and that it has not really been given up. Such a subject, for instance, is the doctrine of the eternal damnation of the heathen; it is seldom openly preached, and yet there is a feeling that it does lie hidden in the background of orthodox Christianity. Again there is a great want of proportion in the treatment of sin and sinful acts; thoughtful people will not believe that what they know to be matters of merely trivial importance, or in which they are not in any full sense free agents, are really deserving of the wrath of a just God—they cannot believe that God is extreme to mark errors and mistakes in regard to which they themselves would not fail to note extenuating circumstances if they were judging a fellow-creature. Above all, people will not admit guilt in matters in which they feel that they themselves as individuals are not morally responsible: the great example of this is, of course, the doctrine of original or birth sin; it is against the moral

conscience of the present day to believe that children are born into the world deserving of the wrath of their Creator, because in some mysterious way the sin of their parents is passed on to them. It is of course pointed out that as a matter of experience children do have to suffer for the sins of their parents, but *suffering* is one thing, *moral guilt* is another, and we feel that only moral guilt can be deserving of God's wrath. In the last fifty years the perceptions of average people in regard to morality have been immensely quickened, and in all teaching that is to be of use this fact must be recognised.

I have tried to point out some of the reasons which render it difficult for the clergy, as the authoritative teachers in religious matters, to grasp the present conditions of thought among educated men and women; so far as they fail to do so, they are out of touch with the life of the day, and it is the honest conviction of many people that this is to a great extent the case. This is nothing short of a disaster for the true interpretation of the New Testament, because we have there set before us, not a body of doctrines, but the Christian Life, life in Christ, and this can be interpreted only in the lives of Christians. If the teaching of Christ is to radically influence, as it ought to do, every department of human activity, then it must be interpreted, not simply in the studies of divines and in the commentaries of theologians, but in the active life of men and women. Ultimate judgment on all points of interpretation will be sound only if it is based on the

widest possible experience, and tested in the actual affairs of life.

It is true that the ministers of Christ are called on to take the lead, but this must be done, not by dogmatic statements as if they alone possessed the truth, but by guiding others in the principles of Christ, so that the solutions of the many problems that confront us may rest on the sure foundation of general experience; in a word, they ought not to judge for others, but teach them to judge for themselves.

II

I have tried to show that it is essential to arriving at a correct interpretation of the New Testament in the practical matters of life that teachers and taught should work in concord, and I have indicated some of the reasons which render it difficult to obtain this concord.

More frankness is required on all sides, and it should not now be impossible to exercise it. In some ways it is hard for those who hold an official position to take the first step, because they may lose influence if they are suspected of being unorthodox; in public teaching especially they have to be careful not to wound the feelings of old-fashioned and conservative people. But for the laity it is much easier—rigid orthodoxy is not expected of them—and if they would only talk a little more freely, and discuss matters more fully, it would en-

able the clergy to judge better of the circumstances with which they have to deal.

For there undoubtedly exists a widespread feeling of dissatisfaction with the formularies that have served previous generations. This feeling exists not only amongst those who more or less openly profess sympathy with the various forms of agnosticism, but also amongst the ordinary church or chapel-going public; it is moreover the reason why many people absent themselves altogether from places of public worship. In saying this I do not refer exclusively, or even primarily, to the religious formularies of particular denominations; I mean rather the forms of words and expressions in which thoughts about spiritual things have clothed themselves in current speech. Men's ideas have to a great extent changed—far more indeed than is usually recognised—and no corresponding change has taken place in the modes of expression in general use, so that a feeling of unreality and mere conventionalism has arisen in regard to the ideas thereby denoted. As the result of early training and associations, a man perhaps begins by accepting such modes of expression as customary and conventional; then experience shows him that those who most frequently use them apparently mean nothing by them; in the end, seeing that they are hollow and practically meaningless, he easily passes on to rejecting them altogether. In itself that is no doubt a good thing, but the danger is that he may thoughtlessly reject, along with the conventional expressions, the underlying elements of eternal

truth, to which, as originally used, they bore fit witness.

But thoughtful men see the necessity of getting below all conventionalities, of grasping the underlying truth, and clothing it in a form suitable to the present stage of intellectual evolution.

The language of religious thought is naturally almost entirely biblical; either it is drawn direct from the words of the Bible, or else it is derived from ideas based on special passages; the significance assigned to such language is therefore a fair test of the prevalent interpretation of the book on which it rests. For instance, the phrase *Christian brotherhood* is in effect a short summary of certain lines of teaching in the New Testament; the significance of the phrase will vary according as the teaching on which it rests is, or is not, fully understood. If we find that people often have the phrase on their lips, but yet show no result of the teaching in their intercourse with others, then we are driven to the conclusion that for them it is a merely conventional expression, and that they do not assign to it any significance that gives evidence of a living interpretation of the principles which it summarises. To *interpret* means to render intelligible to others an idea expressed in a language or in a manner that they do not understand; if therefore we are to interpret aright such an idea as *Christian brotherhood*, we need to express it in terms of the common life of those we desire to instruct, or else it will not be understood; it is not a matter of defining what the phrase meant in its original use, but of showing

what its meaning is in the circumstances under which we are placed.

But those who would interpret must, first of all, make sure that they themselves understand the original aright. The study of the history of Christianity in the earliest ages is thus of supreme importance.

The first, and by far the most important subject of such study must of course be the books of the New Testament; in them the earliest Church has set out for the teaching and guidance of after generations its conception of Christ and of Christianity. Writings of Apostles, and writings of others, which were considered to faithfully represent the spirit of the apostolic teaching, were selected by general agreement to form the authoritative *Canon* or rule of Christian faith. We can know nothing of the teaching of Christ, and of His manner of life (which formed by far the most important vehicle of that teaching), except through those who heard His words, and so far as was possible shared His life. The study of the New Testament is thus in the strictest sense part of the wider study of the history of the beginnings of Christianity, and we are right to supplement it as far as may be by an historical investigation into the conditions of early Christian life, and the results that followed the spread of the teaching, which cannot fail to throw light on the causes from which they sprang.

Such a method is, of course, impossible for those who hold that the New Testament had a miraculous origin, that the writers were merely impassive agents

employed as it were as human pens by the Spirit of God; for them the ultimate source of Christian teaching is to be sought in the New Testament itself, for the very words of which they hold the Deity responsible; beyond those words they have no need to go, because on such a theory they must contain all that it is necessary for a Christian to know, and the one thing needful is to understand them aright. Those who find themselves unable to accept what is commonly, though somewhat inaccurately, called the *verbal inspiration* of the New Testament will look upon the books which form it as the only real means we possess for reaching a true conception of the life and teaching of Christ. The goal aimed at is in either case really the same, but there must be a considerable difference in the methods employed to reach it.

As historical documents the books of the New Testament hold an absolutely unique position, since they embody in an authoritative form the teaching of the immediate disciples of Christ, the substantial accuracy of which is vouched for by the universal and practically unbroken agreement of all the Churches of Christendom. This general proposition we must accept, if we are to have any firm foundation for a study of Christianity; but it does not bind us to any particular theory as to the inspiration of the writings or of their authors, and it leaves it open to us to consider on its merits the attestation, both internal and external, of the different books, or of particular passages in them.

Let us not, however, forget even for a moment

that of far greater weight than any external evidence can possibly be, is the witness which the books themselves bear to their divine origin. As we read them we are forced to exclaim with St. Peter, "to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life." An instance and a proof of this is the fact that by their simple and spiritual teaching they attract many who are repelled by dogmatically formulated systems of religion; to such seekers after truth we would say: "Study the books; from your different standpoint you may well learn truths, and aspects of the truth, that have escaped the theologians, and share with us what you learn."

Rightly therefore, both from an historical and a spiritual point of view, men of serious thought demand to have set before them the Christianity of the New Testament, freed from anything spurious which in the course of transmission may have been introduced into the text, and freed also from the doubtful or even false interpretations which from long familiarity have almost come to be regarded as part and parcel of the original writings.

An examination into the attestation of the several books, and the purification of the text itself, involves study of so intricate a character as to be impracticable except for those who have been able to devote a long time to a course of special preparation.

The interpretation of the books, on the other hand, falls within the proper province of every thinking Christian, who desires to offer to God his reasonable

service—the service that can rightly be expected of a rational creature. Indeed the special training of a professed theologian may often hinder rather than promote his faculty of rightly understanding Scripture, because he approaches the subject with too many preconceived ideas, whether in accordance with, or contrary to, the usually accepted views; these ideas he is only too likely to read into the text, and to neglect the obvious meaning. Dogmatic preconceptions, both orthodox and unorthodox, are in an especial manner fatal to simple and correct interpretation.

III

The manner in which to approach the study of the New Testament is becoming a matter of increasing difficulty. On the theory of a complete verbal inspiration it was quite simple: the student had to put his reason and his own ideas of right and wrong into the background, and simply study the words of the text as they stand. Great caution was indeed necessary in order not to take one passage in a sense contradictory to other passages, for of course it was an axiom that Scripture could not contradict itself, since it all proceeded from an infallible author. If difficulties appeared insoluble, it was necessary to take refuge in so-called *faith*, that is to say, to believe that everything was really perfectly harmonious, but that the harmony lay beyond the reach of human reason. Now, of course, it is true that we

can often see two or more aspects of the truth, which appear to be equally well founded, and yet also appear to be self-contradictory ; sometimes thought and experience will reconcile these apparently mutually-exclusive aspects ; in other cases we are driven to the conclusion that fuller knowledge would reconcile them, that the point of union lies in a sphere beyond our reach, and we are perfectly justified in accepting in faith what we know that we cannot completely understand. But there are many cases in which we feel that human reason is capable of grasping all the essential facts and conditions, and we have no hesitation in saying that a contradiction exists within the region that properly comes under the cognisance of our judgment. In such cases it is a misuse of terms to talk about faith ; it may be, and indeed it very often is, necessary to suspend judgment because of the imperfect character of the evidence or for other reasons ; but suspense of judgment and faith are two totally different things ; the former is necessary in matters that would fall properly within the sphere of our judgment, provided all the essential facts and conditions were known, the latter in matters that lie beyond the province proper to our reason.

For instance, the nature of the Deity transcends our powers of reason, our knowledge of God being limited to what He chooses to reveal of Himself ; if there is a Supreme and Almighty Being who created us and the whole universe, then it is clear that in the strictest sense we live *in Him*, that we can have no standpoint apart from Him from which we can

view His existence and His attributes ; there can be no witness to God other than God Himself ; to prove His existence is just as impossible as to prove our own existence ; we can know as the result of self-consciousness in the one case, and of the action of God on our spirit in the other, that which is incapable of proof, and to this self-witnessing knowledge the term faith is properly applied ; moreover, faith can build upon this foundation of knowledge that is of faith, can unite in one seemingly contradictory factors, and can bridge over regions of darkness and of imperfect light.

But obviously the case is quite different in regard to the works of God in creation ; these lie within the legitimate sphere of action of our apprehension and our reason ; the power that brought us into existence has given us a standpoint from which we can view other created things ; we know that we are separate from them, and exist independently of them, and each man forms in himself a standard by which he can measure things external to himself. On the basis of what is known about facts and phenomena we can build theories, to which with varying degrees of certainty we can give credence ; we can form conjectures to reconcile apparent contradictions, or to fill up regions in which the evidence is insufficient ; in many cases we have to be content with tentative hypotheses, or to suspend judgment altogether. In the sphere of things on which our faculties of perception and reasoning can properly be exercised we cannot justly be required to accept anything in *faith* ; the cause of acceptance must be strictly some result

of our reasoning faculties, whether we judge for ourselves, or accept the conclusions of others, whom we believe to be better able than ourselves to apprehend and use the evidence that exists.

Now it is evident that if we give up the theory that the Spirit of God wrote the books of the New Testament by exercising irresistible compulsion on the human authors, then these books fall properly within the sphere of action of our apprehension and our reason. This somewhat bold statement must of course be limited to the books themselves, and not applied to the central message which they contain; that central message given by Jesus Christ concerning the Nature and Attributes of God appeals to that faculty in man which is beyond and above reason, and to which the name *faith* is rightly applied—it appeals to that inner consciousness of man in virtue of which he is able to recognise and to receive the self-revelation of the Deity. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels; the message is preserved in books written by men, which can be, and ought to be, treated as such. Doubts and difficulties in regard to these books are due to insufficiency of evidence, or to inability on our part to use our faculties to full advantage; where certainty cannot be reached, then suspense of judgment is the only proper attitude of the mind, because the problems are such as could be solved if the evidence were sufficient, and if our faculties were properly trained and employed.

I can best illustrate what I mean by applying these general considerations to a special subject; let

us take the central fact of the resurrection of Christ. Independent of all evidence as to details, it is clear that all the writers, whose books are contained in the New Testament, were absolutely convinced of the resurrection, for they believed that Christ was living and working in them; this then was a matter of faith, resting on spiritual consciousness, as well as a matter of evidence. It would still remain a matter of faith, even supposing every shred of evidence for the rising again of Christ from the tomb to be lost or discredited, to those who are conscious in the same way that Christ is living and working in them. But in regard to the evidence for the resurrection the case is quite different; either it is historically valid and convincing, or it is not, and this is a matter with which properly qualified men ought to be quite competent to deal. If there are discrepancies and contradictions in the different accounts preserved, they must be dealt with in the same way as all historical evidence has to be treated; it is altogether inconsistent with a true idea of faith to imagine that it is properly exercised in accepting statements which appear to the reason to be self-contradictory. There may be, indeed we may well admit that there are, cases in which faith over-rides evidence; but faith is out of place in judging of evidence.

But in the circumstances in which we are actually placed, our faith is in a great measure associated with, if not actually bound up with, acceptance of the traditional views concerning the New Testament. No sooner is a single point of evidence or of interpre-

tation questioned than it re-acts at once on the whole body of our belief.

We are here brought face to face with an immense difficulty; we should like to judge of, and to interpret, the Gospel from a position of entire aloofness—to come to it as educated heathen would, and let it have its natural effect on us, so that we might form an estimate of its inherent power, apart from the deep-seated influence of association; our very familiarity with it places us to some extent at a disadvantage. There is nothing so hard as to get at the right interpretation of a well-known passage, which, perhaps from childhood, we have taken in a wrong sense. It is like the every-day experience of again and again making the same mistake in adding up numbers; absurd as the error may be, familiarity with the wrong result prevents our detecting it. In the same way a classical scholar, reading a book over again after an interval of several years, will fall anew into the errors of his elementary stage of knowledge, simply from the force of association. Yet any attempt at adopting a position of aloofness from the scriptures of the New Testament must inevitably lead to an unsympathetic attitude towards them, than which nothing can be more disastrous for the attaining of a correct interpretation.

It is in this matter that the study of early patristic writers affords us great help. If as we read them we can throw ourself back to their time, and enter sympathetically into their methods of thought, we shall find ourselves in the free atmosphere of true Christian zeal that we require. We shall find them

discussing the deepest subjects in ways that are quite strange to our intellectual habits, treating them freely, and, of course, without any reference to dogmas that were then unformulated, actuated solely by the desire of arriving at the truth and learning God's will as declared in Jesus Christ. Often we shall see that they fall into palpable errors, often their methods will seem illogical, impossibly mystical, and it may be even grotesque and childish; but at least we shall be forced to look at familiar things in a new light, we shall learn that absolute freedom of discussion is in no way inconsistent with earnest, life-forming faith, if only the pure zeal for truth be present.

Paradoxical as it sounds, one of the greatest aids afforded by patristic study in regard to the interpretation of the New Testament is that one is so often forced to disagree with the general principles adopted by those early writers, and more often still with the application of them to particular passages. No serious thinker now could adopt the extreme allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures which was so much in favour with the theologians of the renowned Alexandrian school: of this Origen (died A.D. 253) was by far the most famous exponent. He held that there was a three-fold meaning in Holy Scripture, firstly the literal or historical, secondly the moral, thirdly the mystical or allegorical. When his acute and extremely logical intellect found any difficulty in the literal meaning, he took refuge at once in the allegorical; in this way he was able to hold fast to the view that every word, every proper

name, every particle even of the Scriptures was instinct with divine power. He asserted generally the literal truth of all Scripture, but it is not at all clear how he maintained this in regard to those passages where he abandoned the literal meaning and found only a moral and a mystical one. He seems to have left the literal meaning out of sight altogether, for he considered it to bear the same relation to the higher meanings as the body of a man does to his soul and spirit. Most people now-a-days find it quite impossible to sink the literal meaning in this sort of way, so that the result of reading Origen would often be to force them to reconsider the whole question of the interpretation of the passages with which he thus deals. But while differing in opinion they would always be forced to retain a very large measure of respect for so honest and so spiritually-minded a man, and to feel that they ought to approach the subject with the same open mind, and the same humble desire that he showed of finding true life in the words. The practical result of such study is that we are driven to reconsider the possibility of accepting the literal meaning of certain passages of Scripture, and at the same time we are enabled to do this without losing hold of the belief that there is in the Scriptures, taken as a whole, a full measure of divine inspiration. It may be impossible for us to substitute the allegorical for the literal meaning of a particular passage, but as a general principle the example of Origen will teach us that it is possible to give up the literal meaning in certain cases without abandoning the deep spiritual

teaching which the books of Scripture as a whole afford. While learning that there is much in the current interpretation of the New Testament, and even something in the text itself, which must be frankly abandoned as unhistorical, we yet have continually kept before our eyes the fact that there is also an element of eternal significance and eternal value.

It is now possible for anyone to become familiar with the thought and work of the early Fathers, because so many of their writings have been translated into English, and are easily accessible in a cheap form. Those who will take the trouble to read and to ponder over their writings, and to reconsider the interpretation of the passages of Scripture with which they deal, can hardly fail to secure for themselves what I may call the mental atmosphere which is necessary for the unbiassed study of the New Testament.

IV.

I have tried to show the vital necessity at the present time for frank and earnest study of the New Testament. New conditions of education and of thought have arisen, and in accordance with them practically a fresh start must be made. People in general must work out the problems for themselves, and form their own judgment, for a continuance of the present insincere deference to authority, which to a great ex-

tent is a mere make-believe, can only lead to widespread unreality of the worst type in all religious matters. There has been enough, and perhaps to spare, of destructive criticism of one sort or another; the open opponents of Christianity have certainly been active enough, attacking everything in reason and out of reason, and so also have those who have practically abandoned the attempt to find any historical basis for the Christian system. Some constructive work is now urgently required to set before men and women principles which they can honestly and whole-heartedly work out in detail in their daily lives.

We need to express anew the great principles of Christianity in form and language suited to the present time; we want to get at the great fundamental truths that underlie all denominational formularies and modes of expression; we require above all to ascertain what we can of the spiritual laws which God employs as the vehicles of His spiritual influence on men; and these laws, we are sure, must run parallel to, not contrary to, the laws that govern the natural creation and the everyday experience of mankind.

It is useless to imagine that such a work can be carried out by any single divine, however great his learning and personal piety may be, or by any association of theologians. Work done in the study or the conference room is too much cut off from human life as it really is. Nor can we look to any particular denomination to carry out the necessary task; all denominations are in a peculiar way creatures of their

past history, and cannot sufficiently shake themselves free from its influence to pass an unbiassed judgment. But beyond this all denominational bodies exist for the purpose of influencing conduct, and therefore questions of immediate expediency must enter largely into their consideration. They require a definite body of teaching, not speculations on subjects still under discussion. I do not wish to disparage denominational teaching in any way; for purposes of instruction, exhortation, and guidance of conduct, it is necessary that the accepted conclusions of thought and experience should be expressed in a definite form; whenever this is done, denominational teaching is the result. What I mean is that from the nature of the case, denominational teachers as such, and denominational bodies in their corporate capacity, are to a great extent debarred from bringing to a thoroughgoing test the foundations on which their systems rest.

Who, then, can perform the work, of which there is such urgent need, of testing everything, whatever its seeming antiquity and authority, and of discovering what is essential and really of eternal significance? It can be done only by a community of people who will bring everything to the test of the experience of the actual life of men and women; who will not be afraid of their own thoughts, but frankly confess what they believe, and what they reject; and who, where they cannot reach such definite convictions, will freely acknowledge that they suspend judgment, instead of pretending to acquiesce in denominational formularies. The present ideas

that govern all our religious thought have been gradually formed by the general opinion of the nation under the guidance of certain prominent schools of teaching. These ideas can be tested, and, if need be, altered, only by that same general opinion which has given them their present binding force, and by that only if it can free itself from the fetters that have bound and conditioned the thought of previous generations. Therefore it is essential to the cause of true progress that a sufficient number of persons, typical of our present average of moral and intellectual development, and as far as possible free from theological or denominational bias, should give their earnest attention to the problems which press for solution. The main object of this essay is to stimulate such enquiry, and not to put forward any personal conclusions of my own.

In a sense indeed it is of extreme importance that the personal element should not be made too prominent, for there is just as much danger, or even more, in following a system formulated by one man, as in blindly accepting denominational dogmas. Individuals who step aside from the general current of thought, may, in a certain sense, become leaders; but owing to the impetus given to them by violent separation from the main mass they are apt to go off at a tangent, to forget or ignore many of the essential facts, and so to lose themselves in the development of their own idiosyncrasies. The great danger of following one's own opinions is that one is almost inevitably led to follow them too far, and that the basis of experience on which they rest is a very

limited one. This is the reason why so many people find it the wisest course to keep their own views to a great extent in abeyance by repressing them within the limits of some well established system, or at all events by not allowing themselves full freedom of expression except within those limits. It is obvious at once that such an attitude must render progress very slow, if not impossible. But this danger can be avoided, and a reasonable rate of progress attained to, if a sufficient number of people move forward together in general agreement on matters of primary importance. It is the general influence of a body of thoughtful persons, correcting each other's excesses or limitations, and moving forward with even tenor, that alone can produce the required result.

V.

Such a movement in the direction of true progress as I have just described as necessary is now, and long has been, going on amongst us. The work has gone on so silently that many people are quite unaware of it, some because they cannot see, others because they will not. But it is nevertheless a fact that the generation which is now approaching its prime in intellectual and social activity adopts a very different attitude towards the whole question of religion from that which was most widespread among people of the previous generation. There is surely not less earnestness now than

formerly, but there is a greater hatred of unreality, and this is often mistaken for lack of reverence towards forms traditionally held as sacred. The young man who plays golf on Sunday is probably just as earnest in character as his predecessor who wasted the whole day at home; the difference is that he cannot see why he should lose an opportunity for healthy exercise for the sake of merely pretending to honour the day. If the golf-player is confronted with a difficult moral problem he will probably be quite as willing to face it, and equally capable of solving it. In fact it is amongst those who have gone furthest in shaking themselves free from traditional formality that we find the greatest keenness in attacking the actual problems of life, and this surely is not merely a sign of moral earnestness, it is a true following of the example of Christ.

The principles which govern the lives of earnest men are in their essence religious, and find a place in the religion of Christ; such men are in fact interpreting the teaching of the Son of Man in terms of modern life and thought, they are making new bottles for the wine which is ever new. What is needed is that adequate expression — expression made articulate in ways that men can see and recognise—should be given to the results that are being reached.

In one case at all events this has been done in the right way. The conscience of civilised men has realised that the alleviation of undeserved suffering is an essential part of our duty. From the growing recognition of this fundamental principle

has sprung the present unparalleled activity in support of hospitals and other philanthropic institutions for the alleviation of those who are in distress. Men have got a clear grasp of a principle, and they take delight in bringing it to a practical result. That is an example of the way in which public opinion should form itself, and express itself. The movement is, we must believe, due to the growth of a more adequate appreciation of the spirit of Christianity; it brings to good effect the teaching of the words and acts of Christ, for there is no cause to which we can point as having produced such results except the long-continued training of our branch of the human race in the principles of Christianity; yet the work so obviously rests on eternal laws of universal obligation that not only all denominations of Christians, but even Christians and non-Christians, can join together in it. It is in this that its extreme importance for us consists, because it is a striking proof that the teaching of Christ is in agreement with those laws that are recognised as binding by the general conscience of mankind. The teaching has been there, ready to hand in the New Testament, all these centuries; in a measure, and according to the circumstances and social conditions of the times, it has been acted on, and now we are realising that the immense resources of modern science, wealth, and organisation must be utilised to put the teaching into practice with a fulness that has not before been possible. The great movement in support of hospitals is the most important contribution of this generation

to the constructive criticism of the New Testament.

Great practical results can only be produced from a principle clearly grasped by the intelligence. Acts are the result of thoughts, and men will not act consistently and thoroughly unless they are inspired by deep conviction. Religious thought has in great measure become crystallised in the form of dogmas, and in this way many of the main motives for earnest action have been rendered useless, because they have been taken out of the sphere of consideration of the great mass of people. On any matter which is considered to fall within the province of dogmatic theology it is very difficult to obtain an expression of the current course of general thought. Such subjects are dealt with almost entirely by those who are either defending or attacking a certain dogmatic position, and in neither case can results of permanent value be expected, because both sides are sure to be blind to some of the complex, one might almost say conflicting, elements involved. Ordinary people either acquiesce formally in some accepted statement of belief, thus rendering further thought very difficult indeed for themselves, because it always seems to bring them near what they look on as the edge of the precipice; or else they frankly refuse to consider dogmatic subjects at all, taking refuge in a vague agnosticism. Yet it is most important that such subjects should be faced, and treated in the way I have tried to indicate, by the general conscience of Christians. Dogmatic theology deals with subjects of the deepest importance to humanity; it is the forms in which the

results have been cast that have lost touch with human life, not the essential elements involved. If there is a vital truth underlying a dogmatic formulary or mode of expression, it needs to be recast in a form that will emphasize, instead of obscuring, its vital life-forming power. If on the contrary the dogmatic formulary expresses a conception which the growing experience of mankind shows to be false, it needs to be contradicted and refuted by a clear expression of the contemporary Christian conscience. One matter in which we have gone forward is the growing belief in the universal fatherhood of God; if it is found that dogmatic formularies militate against and obscure that belief, then they must be resolutely refuted and banished to the same limbo as the idea—once so widely held and so consistently acted on—that persecution for religious convictions is not only justifiable, but imperative.

The truth is that the ground must be cleared before satisfactory advance can be made, and if only educated people would more openly confess what they really think, it would be found that this necessary clearance has in great measure already been effected. But it is requisite that those who have given up the old should begin to build anew. If in many points the traditional interpretation of the New Testament has to be abandoned, it is all the more necessary that the elements at least of a new interpretation should be put forward. The teaching of Christ cannot be ignored; it has had too great an influence on the history of mankind for that ever

to be possible, and its spiritual power is still seen to be as great as ever. When that teaching is rightly understood it must commend itself to the reason of earnest men. It is of the utmost importance therefore that stress should be laid on those aspects of it which must and do find universal acceptance. Those who say that they have no religion except that of being charitable to their fellow creatures in word and deed are but following in the steps of the Son of Man; the highest ideas of morality to which we can attain are never found to be contrary to His teaching, and always serve to throw fresh light on it. Let these principles of charity and morality be claimed as essential, not merely as accidental, elements of the Gospel; it was to them that Christ trusted to commend his words to His hearers. All who hold and consistently endeavour to act on such principles should be claimed on the side of Christ as disciples in deed if not in name.

Is there no fear, however, of reducing Christianity to the position of a mere system of morality? There is really no need to dread this, because the Gospel has in itself an inherent power which will work like leaven if once men are brought under its influence. The morality of Christ does not appeal to feelings of refined selfishness. He did not teach that men could make themselves happiest by promoting the happiness of others; for Him the reason for morality was that it corresponds with the Nature of God as He revealed it. This is one of the very central lessons of Christianity, and when it is once learned then charity becomes, not simply the

crowning virtue of human morality, but a religion in itself—the worship through love of the God of love.

VI.

I have now to show how the principles I have tried to draw out can be practically applied in current life and thought to the interpretation of the New Testament. This is all the more difficult because I do not wish to bring forward such conclusions as I seem to myself to have reached, but rather to point out certain lines of thought which may profitably be followed by those who do not claim to have any special acquaintance with theology or ecclesiastical history.

I must assume that those for whom I am writing have abandoned the old-fashioned rigid adherence to traditional orthodoxy; a great majority of church-going lay people have done this, whether they admit it openly or not. More especially I must assume that the doctrine of the verbal inspiration of Scripture, which with many people differs little from an idolatrous worship of the words of the Bible, is frankly given up; and that doctrines founded on individual verses or passages will not be accepted, if they appear in their practical application, or in their logical consequences, to be alien to the spirit of Christianity, and to the mind of its divine Author; and further, that if a special doctrine is repudiated, the practices and beliefs that rest solely on that doctrine will be repudiated as well.

Let me take as our first example the doctrine of original sin, to which I have already briefly referred. The main point of this doctrine is well expressed in the familiar words of the Church Catechism, "being by nature born in sin, and the children of wrath." This was enforced, in the face of strenuous opposition, by Augustine of Hippo; he won his case by the great weight of his commanding personality, and his conclusions have become the tradition of orthodoxy in later ages. But this is not a matter to be decided by the arguments of theologians; the question is one for the conscience of Christians. To begin with, no direct statement of this doctrine is to be found in the New Testament—it is of the nature of an inference; there is therefore *prima facie* evidence for the belief that it is not essential to Christianity, or it would have been distinctly formulated by the Founder and His earliest disciples. This statement is of course in direct opposition to the principles on which systems of dogmatic theology are built up, yet I hope it may commend itself to those whose common sense is not blunted by over-specialised studies. The question to be settled is one for the judgment of practical Christians, not of theorising theologians; still less is it one in which we can accept the judgment of former ages, when habits of thought differed essentially from those of our own day.

The wide acceptance of this doctrine is undoubtedly due to the fact that it contains a certain measure of truth; our own experience — the universal experience of mankind — tells us

that we are "born in sin," in the sense that the possession of free-will induces us to follow our own will in opposition to the will of God. Clearly free-will was given to us by our Creator; is it then right to say that a necessary consequence of the possession of that gift is in itself deserving of the wrath of God, or in other words, that it involves moral guilt? Granting that we are in this sense "born in sin," are we therefore necessarily the "children of wrath?" We need to take a concrete example in order to form a correct opinion; is an unbaptised infant so tainted with moral guilt as to be the object of the wrath of God? According to the doctrine of original sin it is; but those who remember that Jesus said of unbaptised children "of such is the kingdom of heaven" can hardly believe that a doctrine which involves such a consequence is in accordance with the mind of the Founder of Christianity.

If the consequences of the doctrine are found to be opposed to the spirit of Christ (and the concrete example I have taken is only one of many that will occur to every thinking person), then the doctrine itself, as dogmatically stated, must be frankly given up; in doing this we do not deny the measure of truth which it contains.

What results will follow from thus abandoning what has been for centuries one of the main pillars of dogmatic systems of Christianity? Our ideas on many matters of the deepest importance will be fundamentally altered. Baptism will no longer be regarded as a semi-magical rite by which certain

mysterious results of our human birth are removed. We shall be able to turn afresh to our New Testament, and to strive with open minds to ascertain what teaching is there given. Again, our view of the Atonement wrought by Christ will certainly have to be modified, because we shall have ceased to believe in the existence of a wrath of God against man as man, from which he has to be delivered by mechanical means. And here will come our greatest gain in the interpretation of the New Testament; we shall be free to take the Master's gracious words in their truest, fullest sense. So long as we believe that God is a Being whose wrath has to be propitiated, we are driven to look on the character of Jesus as being higher and nobler than that of the Supreme Being; freeing ourselves from the grievous yoke of the commandments of men, we shall be able to believe with the fulness of heart and intellect that all the love and compassion and mercy and truth that appeal to us so in the person of Jesus are indeed the revelation to us of the very Nature of His Father.

One matter which is greatly exercising men's minds at the present time is really vitally connected with the doctrine of original sin. It was believed in old days that moral guilt was conveyed from the parents to the child in the natural process of generation, and that this process had in itself and of necessity a sinful character; it was therefore considered necessary to hold that Jesus was born in a miraculous manner, and not by the ordinary process of nature, in order that His absolute sinlessness might

be guaranteed. If this view is put on one side, along with the doctrine of original sin with which it is intimately connected, then there is no reason, as far as we can judge of the ordinary methods employed by God in His working, why the human body of Jesus should not have been produced through the agency of a human father. The relation in which Jesus stands to God the Father is not thereby affected one way or the other. This is not a matter which falls properly within the sphere of faith, because we should be perfectly competent, in the employment of our intellectual faculties, to form a correct opinion as to whether the birth of Jesus was miraculous or not, supposing the evidence to be sufficient.

We find the Virgin Birth distinctly taught in the first two chapters of St. Matthew's Gospel, but the importance of this teaching is very much lessened by the inclusion in the first chapter of the pedigree of Joseph, and also by the generally doubtful character of much of the matter peculiar to this Gospel. In our present text of St. Luke, the Virgin Birth is implied in the first two chapters, but there are signs that in some places the text has been tampered with, and again the pedigree of Joseph is inserted. But the Virgin Birth is not mentioned or implied in St. Mark's Gospel, which is thought on good grounds to be the nearest to the original preaching of the Apostles. We do not find that either Jesus Himself, or the writers of the books of the New Testament, ever founded any argument upon the circumstances of His birth, except that the writer of St. Matthew's

Gospel regards them as the fulfilment of prophecy ; this is an argument which can carry no weight, for even if the word used by Isaiah really meant virgin, no one would deny that St. Mary was a virgin previous to the birth of Jesus. Neither St. John nor St. Paul ever refers to the miraculous birth of Jesus, and it is practically impossible to believe that they would have failed to do so had they known it.

Of course I am not going into details on one side or the other ; I am merely trying to indicate lines of thought. The questions that have to be settled are these : " Is the evidence for the Virgin Birth sufficient to justify the teaching of a belief in it as an essential part of Christianity ? " and alternatively, " Is a belief in it really essential to Christianity, that is to say, does it really affect our estimate of the nature of Christ, or of the spiritual value of His life and teaching ? " In regard to the interpretation of the New Testament, evidently it must make a great difference to us whether we believe Jesus, the Son of God, to have been truly man, or only man in virtue of a miracle. To say that He was " Man, of the substance of His Mother," is to make Him different from what we commonly mean by the term *man*. These are matters on which lay people are quite as competent to form an opinion as the most learned theologians. We want to grasp, and decide on, the essential elements of the question in accordance with the highest light now granted to us, and this becomes all but impossible when we are once involved in the mist of historical or present controversy.

Christianity, in the last resort, stands or falls in accordance with the estimate formed of the life and teaching of Christ. In countries that have long been in name christianised there will always be large numbers who will accept special systems through traditional reverence and the influence of others, but there will also be an ever-increasing number of people who insist upon thinking for themselves, and rejecting shibboleths. Again non-christian nations, as they rise in the moral and intellectual scale, will test in their own way the foundations of the religion offered for their acceptance; to them the voice of authority will mean little or nothing, and they will subject the teaching given them to the same test to which Jesus Himself willingly submitted—to the judgment of the conscience of spiritually-minded men eagerly striving after truth. We must clear away all that cannot stand that test.

Only by approaching the New Testament with a perfectly open mind, in the spirit of little children desirous of learning from One whom we feel instinctively to be greater than ourselves, shall we be able to attain to such an interpretation of it as will reveal what are the elements that are essential to its unique influence over mankind. Not until we give up forcing texts into agreement with this or that preconceived theory shall we be able to see how very simple the teaching really is, and in its simplicity we shall recognise the seal of its divine origin. It was on the simplest ideas that Jesus always laid most stress: so simple were they that they did not seem to suc-

ceeding generations strong enough to bear the weight of a religion for the salvation of mankind. Foremost among the things taught by Jesus stood the doctrine of suffering for the sake of others, of full and willing self-sacrifice, but we have not yet been able to grasp that simple idea firmly enough to see that it gave the greatest conceivable value and sanctity to His death, and that by accepting the principle so fully set forth and displayed before us we can gain salvation through the blood of Christ. From the earliest times the weakness of men has sought to increase the unutterably simple grandeur and significance of that sacrifice by surrounding it with a halo of the mysterious. Let us return as children to the true source of wisdom, ready to abandon all our supposed knowledge if it prove to be false, yet ready to use every means by which God in the course of ages has increased our intellectual powers; there let us search for the precious jewels which are recognised by their simplicity no less than by their radiance. When we find them, and wear them in our intercourse with others, they will draw men and nations to Jesus as nothing else can.

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